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Valentine's Day marks worrying romance scams increase

Netsafe calls for vigilance as scammers target online love seekers

February 14 is meant to be a day for romance and roses – but a concerning number of people are inadvertently getting caught up with scammers masked as soulmates.

New Zealand's online safety experts have recorded a 39 percent increase in romance scams involving a financial loss between 2019 and 2020.

The average loss per victim was a staggering \$18,667.

Netsafe asks everyone attempting to meet someone online – whether through an app, website or forum – to stop and consider whether it is appropriate to be sending money to an individual whose intentions may be dubious.

Netsafe data reveals a typical victim of a romance scam in New Zealand is a European female aged between 41 and 64 who lives in Auckland.

An eye-watering \$3,434,816 in losses were lodged with Netsafe in 2020.

Martin Cocker, Netsafe CEO, says Valentine's Day was an opportune time to remind people to be mindful of the potential risks.

"We all know that searching for love can be exciting as well as stressful, particularly as people's ability to date has been restricted due to the pandemic," Cocker says. "While meeting people online can have its benefits, we recommend being cautious when potential cupids start seeking cash."

"Running romance scams is a full-time job for some scammers, and they can be very good at it. The stories will seem complex and utterly-believable, often involving tales of desperation or a need for money so the partner can travel to meet their future spouse. Still, unfortunately, these pleas can often be a rouse."

Scammers spend a lot of energy building a relationship online and invest time in making it seem very real. Some reports to Netsafe include periods of relationship building that exceeds six months before any money requests are made.

They will have a fake backstory: family, friends and job. Often they're scamming more than one person at a time. Once a scammer has worked to gain the trust of the person they've targeted, they will use various stories to get money or details from that person. They may start by requesting small sums of money to test the waters and request larger amounts.

Netsafe has free resources available on netsafe.org.nz, to help people understand what to look out for in a romance scam and a team who can provide free, confidential and non-judgemental advice seven days a week.

On a positive note, the average loss of a romance scam has fallen 17 percent in the last year.

“People meet online every day and sometimes go on to develop meaningful, long-lasting relationships,” Cocker says.

“The complexity of romance scams, and the audacity of perpetrators behind them, has also – worryingly – meant more people are getting drawn into and exploited through romance scams.”

The money is often requested in untraceable ways, like a money order or prepaid card.

Cocker says the best way to avoid being caught up in a romance scam is to be cautious who you communicate with online and never respond to requests or hints for money from someone you haven't met in person.

“If you think you're being scammed you should stop all contact and avoid sending further payments,” he says.

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About Netsafe

Netsafe is an independent non-profit organisation with an unrelenting focus on online safety. We keep people of all ages safe online by providing free support, advice and education. Visit [netsafe.org.nz](https://www.netsafe.org.nz) for useful resources or call 0508 638 723 seven days a week for help with an online incident.